



UNRWA DEMYSTIFIED: A GUIDE FOR COMPLEX CONVERSATIONS

[Partners for Progressive Israel](#) is proud to offer this guide, crafted with expert input, on addressing concerns in our local Jewish and progressive communities regarding the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, better known as UNRWA. While we cannot address every question about this controversial agency, this document is intended to equip individuals with the basic facts of UNRWA's funding, operations, and role in addressing the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip and Palestinian territories.

1. What is UNRWA? What do they do?

UNRWA is the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. The United Nations General Assembly established UNRWA in 1949 with a mandate to provide humanitarian assistance and protection to registered Palestine refugees in the Agency's area of operations pending a just and lasting solution.

UNRWA operates in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

When UNRWA was first given its mandate, it was organized to serve both Jewish and Palestinian refugees living in the former British Mandate of Palestine, regardless of their ethnic or religious identity. However, with the establishment of the state of Israel and its citizenship and development opportunities afforded to displaced Jewish refugees in the region, in 1952¹ the mandate was revised to include the relevant Palestinian Arab population, regardless of religious affiliation.

UNRWA's primary responsibilities are providing education, social services programming, primary healthcare access, and microfinance loans to promote economic development in the regions it serves.

¹ UN General Assembly, Annual Report of the Director of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, covering the period 1 July 1951 to 30 June 1952. Seventh Session, Supplement No. 13 (A/2171) 1952. "Late in June, an agreement was concluded with Israel whereby the Government assumed responsibility for the care of the remaining 19,000 refugees in that country as of 1 July 1952."



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2. Why does UNRWA serve multiple generations of refugees? How is that refugee status established and resolved?

Palestine refugees are not distinct from other refugees in protracted refugee situations such as those from Afghanistan or Somalia, where there are multiple generations of refugees, registered by UNHCR (UN High Commissioner for Refugees) as refugees and supported as such. Protracted refugee situations are the result of the failure to find political solutions to their underlying political crises.

It is important to note that registration with UNRWA does not afford refugee status under the 1951 Geneva Convention, but provides services and assistance based on a definition that sets out eligibility for receipt of such services. **Unlike UNHCR, UNRWA does not have a mandate to resettle Palestine refugees and has no authority to seek lasting durable solutions for refugees.**

3. How is UNRWA funded?

UNRWA is funded through the support of UN Member States, including regional governments and the European Union. Historically, the US has been the largest single funder of the organization, with over \$100 million provided in 2022. Together, these sources represent over 90% of financial contributions to the Agency. In 2023, UNRWA resource mobilization efforts yielded a total pledged amount of US\$ 1.46 billion (including UN Secretariat regular budget support for international staff).

4. I've heard that UNRWA employees were involved in the October 7th terror attacks.

This is true— Israel has alleged that up to 18 UNRWA employees (out of approximately 30,000) were involved in some way with the Oct. 7 attacks or knew about them in advance.

Reports differ as to whether sufficient evidence has been provided for all of these allegations, but UNRWA has fired or suspended all accused employees. Most nations that originally suspended their financial contributions to the UNRWA upon hearing these allegations have reinstated them, with the exception of the United States. For more information, see [the official UN report on the matter](#), published in February of last year,



which contains clear-eyed recommendations for the agency to maintain its principle of neutrality while operating in Gaza and beyond.

5. How is UNRWA involved in emergency humanitarian aid in Gaza? What about aid diversion?

UNRWA is not primarily an emergency aid organization. Rather, it is a temporary development organization, whose mandate has been extended every three years since the late 1940s due to the unresolved nature of the Palestinian refugee crisis **and** in the absence of a functional and established independent Palestinian state.

However, because of UNRWA's practice of employing local community members for the vast majority of its staff, its aid delivery practices, and long term presence, the organization serves as an irreplaceable "backbone" for the delivery of humanitarian aid in the Gaza strip when necessary, such as now. Without UNRWA operating on the ground, **there is no reliable way** to distribute humanitarian aid to civilians in Gaza at this time.

As [this report](#) on an analogous issue of aid diversion in Afghanistan explains, the stealing of humanitarian aid resources by militant groups is a known issue in a variety of humanitarian crises around the globe. International sanctions and the regulatory practices of aid funders and governments have the primary role in combating aid diversion. As this report and experience in other conflicts make clear, the issue of aid diversion alone cannot be a reason to completely suspend the funding of humanitarian aid, as this would neither improve the structural issues on the ground in Gaza or elsewhere and would deny life-saving food, water, and medicine to civilians.

6. I have concerns about the curriculum in UNRWA-run schools. Where does that curriculum come from?

UNRWA uses host government textbooks, in line with [UN best practices](#) for providing quality education in refugee settings, **and** reviews all textbooks used in its schools to identify sections that may not be in line with UN values and UNESCO standards for teaching. As a United Nations program, UNRWA additionally offers supplementary materials in its schools focused on human rights and conflict resolution education.



The textbooks that have been called into question are not created by UNRWA, but are rather products of the Palestinian Authority's education system. Israel has had issues with Palestinian textbooks for decades and there is no "neutral" agency that can provide textbooks both sides would accept. Palestinian Authority-sanctioned materials are what is available.

It must be noted: Israeli detractors are likely right that most UNRWA employees may have some personal animus against the actions of the Israeli government. Almost all the agency employees are themselves Palestinian refugees, facing active threats to their wellbeing and human rights. As UNRWA employees, those employed by the agency have a responsibility to maintain professional neutrality. Additionally, Israel has offered no workable solution for providing refugee aid, especially in the current circumstances, that does not rely on UNRWA.

7. Why does this matter now?

The United States, under the Biden Administration, suspended all of its funding to UNRWA in January of 2024. PPI, along with a number of other liberal Zionist organizations, has endorsed the UNRWA Restoration Act and equivalent bills in the US Senate and House of Representatives, based on the immediate need of civilians in Gaza. Additionally, the Knesset has voted to expel UNRWA from Israel and [severely limit the organization's ability](#) to operate in Gaza, the West Bank, and beyond. This Knesset bill will go into effect on **January 30th, 2025**, revoking an agreement established in 1967 that allowed the agency to operate in Palestinian territories under Israeli control. These conversations are difficult for our community, but they are a matter of extreme humanitarian urgency.